Navigating the Post-Iraq War Landscape in the Persian Gulf

By Jason E. Strakes

The impact of the United States’ 2003 invasion of Iraq on diplomatic relations in the Persian Gulf has become a primary concern in contemporary international affairs. Considering the broad opposition to the U.S. initiative among regional leaders both before and during the war, a traditional Arabist perspective might predict that Iraq’s immediate neighbors would join efforts to resist the projection of U.S. military power in the region.¹ Such collective opposition would seem especially likely given Washington’s intimate security relationship with Israel. Yet despite these conditions, there is little evidence to indicate that the Iraq War has inspired political convergence among the Arab nations comparable to the collective opposition to Israel that prevailed from 1948 to 1978.² Neither has the realist concept of “bandwagoning”—the idea that states will ally themselves with the winner of an international conflict—been applicable.³ Indeed, the removal of the Baathist threat to Kuwait, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia has not motivated their leaders to unite in support of U.S. efforts to create a benevolent post-Saddam Iraq. Clearly, conventional theories of alliance formation do not apply to the present situation in the Persian Gulf and greater Middle East. Instead, recent experience points to domestic politics as a more viable explanation of the state of international relations in the region.

Middle East Alliances: Precedents and Portents

In the twentieth century, Middle Eastern alliances were typically asymmetric in structure, most often established by a major world power such as the United Kingdom, the United States, or the Soviet Union as a means of controlling the policy choices and behavior of their regional clients.⁴ These

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alliances provided local governments with resources such as military and economic aid to maintain their domestic political regimes. Historical examples of such alliances include the Baghdad Pact created in 1955 by Britain, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan as a regional equivalent to NATO; and the 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine, through which the United States sought to contain potential Soviet influence by making the Lebanese, Jordanian, and Saudi governments a counterweight to the radical Arab nationalist bloc of Egypt and Syria. However, both of these arrangements were short-lived, dissolving as a result of the Nasserite uprising that threatened the leadership of Lebanon and the military coup led by Abdel Kareem Qassem, which overthrew the Iraqi monarchy in 1958.

In contrast, indigenous efforts at regional coalition building have been minimal or unsuccessful. Despite the shared recognition of serious external threats, most attempts to create Middle Eastern security regimes have not offered the attractions of the classical asymmetric arrangements. During the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—declined to establish defense agreements with other Arab countries or with the superpowers. A lack of compatibility of interests between the Gulf monarchies and the secular dictatorships of Egypt and Syria made such arrangements infeasible. Furthermore, the leaders of these states feared that increased U.S. or Soviet influence, though providing a greater measure of external security, would seriously impact the internal stability of their countries by provoking resistance from militant Islamist groups. Similarly, the failure of the 1992 Damascus Declaration, which proposed stationing Egyptian and Syrian peacekeeping forces in the oil emirates in exchange for monetary aid, signified a lack of effective local security arrangements after the 1991 Persian Gulf War. In this instance, the GCC states preferred the protection offered by the victorious U.S. forces, in part because of the rejection of pan-Arab nationalism and the growing primacy of state sovereignty. In both cases, domestic political preferences and self-interested evaluations of the international climate determined the degree to which interstate cooperation was desirable.

**Domestic Sources of Security Policy**

These examples suggest the need to examine more closely the influence of domestic politics on the foreign policies of Middle Eastern states. The “domestic sources” research agenda in the study of international relations posits that individual decisionmakers will choose those foreign policy options that are expected to maximize their chances of a preferred outcome, whether
in terms of enhanced national security or by way of a politically desirable relationship with other states. This assumption provides the analyst with a means of predicting how a given leader will behave in a conflict situation. The primary logic underlying the linkage of domestic politics and alliances states that political leaders’ concern with maintaining their internal position sensitizes them to the domestic costs that their management of international affairs may cause them to incur. Therefore, incumbents will rationally evaluate international events that may have significant repercussions for politics within the states that they govern. These evaluations will in turn figure into their calculus of foreign policy strategies such as the formation of alliances or the selection of alliance partners. At the same time, the influence of domestic interest groups or a lack of compatibility in policy preferences between prospective partners may impose limits on alliance activity.

This concept is operationalized by the “revisionist” approach to national security. This approach, which is especially applicable to developing nations ruled by autocratic governments, assumes that the concern for domestic regime stability and the maintenance of political office is synonymous with defense against external threats. It therefore posits that military power is fundamental to the preservation of governments threatened by both internal opposition and challenges from abroad. Thus, governments may utilize instruments such as alliance diplomacy in order to secure sources of military or economic aid that reinforce both the political power and outward prestige of the leadership. However, since perceptions of internal and external threats are inherently linked, actions taken by one state to enhance its security can provoke defensive responses by neighboring states, thus raising the level of tension relative to the severity of domestic security concerns.

Viewed through this lens, the quality of alliances in a regional context represents the level of perceived threat experienced by the incumbent leaderships in their constituent states. The incorporation of domestic politics also presents a challenge to the assumption that serious conflicts of interest among alliance members will not preclude the formation of coalitions in the presence of a common adversary. Because policy changes in one state can motivate responses among political groupings in another, decision makers may seek intervention by regional partner governments to reinforce their domestic advantage as well as use their alliance policy to influence the position of factions within another government. The United States’ “preventive intervention” in Iraq during March and April 2003, and its long-term objective of replacing the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein with a democratic leadership, substantially affected the security perceptions of governments in the Persian Gulf region and, by extension, the traditional order of alliance politics in the Middle East.
Limits to Regional Cooperation

That these states do not appear to recognize common security interests complicates any assessment of postwar coalition building in the Middle East. The distribution of preferences among these actors reveals an ambiguous mix of support for, and opposition to, the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In many countries, the forcible removal of Saddam Hussein has presented new threats to stability, and for some leaders, favorable domestic political success depends upon U.S. failure in Iraq. At the same time, the governments of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Kuwait have been strongly opposed to a general U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. The closest that Arab governments have come to a shared objective is a common interest in the United States’ failure to establish a precedent for regime change based on popular opposition movements and competitive elections. However, this negative incentive for collective action has not yet driven the aforementioned states to form regional coalitions in pursuit of a common objective, especially because U.S. evacuation would contribute to the perception of a power vacuum, encouraging foreign and local insurgents and exposing local governments to cross-border conflicts. Thus these states lack a collective purpose that would compel them to work cooperatively and “balance” or “bandwagon” in response to U.S. actions.

U.S. ACTIONS HAVE NOT SERIOUSLY AFFECTED THE DISTRIBUTION OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

Though some Middle Eastern states favor a “status quo” state in Iraq (i.e., a pragmatic authoritarian regime that would restore order and suppress both Islamic militants and those favoring democratic governance and economic reform), to date no regional aggregation has emerged to counter the United States’ vision of a democratic Iraqi regime.\(^{15}\) Two possible explanations for this condition exist. First, an unsuccessful U.S. venture in Iraq would discourage the United States from further attempts to influence regional politics, an outcome which is essentially compatible with the interests of local regimes. Because the postwar reconstruction program has already faced serious difficulties, these countries do not have to engage in collective action to undermine U.S. policy. The second explanation is more complex and involves cross-cutting loyalties and cleavages. Although the United States’ desire to establish a liberal democratic regime in the region may threaten Middle Eastern leaders’ hold on power, the resources and guarantees of security that the United States provides weaken the incentives that might otherwise galvanize those leaders into a coalition to openly resist U.S. initiatives in Iraq. Therefore, it remains to be determined, within the context of existing constraints, what kind of bilateral or multilateral trade-offs between primary
political interests, such as security and autonomy, these states are likely to confront in the near term.

Finally, the role of asymmetric power relations, especially the influence of the United States at the global level, must be considered. Altogether the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its imposition on local preferences represents the peculiar circumstance of a predominant state in the international system pursuing a preventive strategy against a weak minor power. At first glance, the U.S. intervention in Iraq seems to have drastically changed any previously established status quo among regional powers. However, while U.S. actions may have altered local shares of diplomatic influence, they have not seriously affected the prevailing distribution of power in the Middle East. Israel’s predominant regional position remains intact, and the United States retains its ability to interfere in Middle Eastern affairs. The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq should therefore be recognized as simply the continuation of a longstanding precedent of great power intervention in the region.

Of course, it is possible that U.S. intervention could alter regional dynamics to foster a Middle Eastern coalition. If the preferences of regional actors are strongly affected, alignments could form between states that have traditionally been at loggerheads in regional policy. At the same time, if long-established U.S. allies perceive an overall disadvantage to their vital interests, they may work against U.S. attempts and form a regional coalition in support of their strategic objectives. Nevertheless, although U.S. actions may create conditions that lead to a Middle Eastern coalition, there is no indication that this will occur in the near future.

The Strength of the Status Quo

On the whole, conditions suggest that Middle Eastern governments, particularly the non-democracies, would generally prefer a return to the prewar condition of regional politics. The Bush administration’s introduction of competitive elections in Iraq is likely to create ripple effects in many Middle Eastern states, both by increasing domestic agitation in favor of institutional reform and instigating possible terror campaigns targeting those who support U.S. strategic objectives. Many local leaders consequently believe that the U.S. invasion of Iraq has weakened their security, and possibly their longevity in office. At the same time, most of the governments neighboring Iraq also depend on U.S. resources or political support against foreign and domestic adversaries. Forming a regional coalition to thwart U.S. ambitions in Iraq would endanger U.S. support for their position regarding other regional issues or internal problems. As the following analysis suggests, domestic
politics and the need to maintain domestic institutional arrangements, rather than pressures caused by the shifting of capabilities in the regional system, constitute a major barrier to the formation of a coalition that could prevent the United States from achieving its objectives in Iraq.

Following the 1978 Camp David Agreement, Egypt received the United States’ second most generous foreign aid allocation. Though Cairo was opposed to any major shift in regional politics that might have been caused by the U.S. intervention in Iraq, it condemned Iraqi policies as a major cause of the conflict and allowed use of its sea lanes for U.S. naval forces. The Hosni Mubarak regime also has a very prominent stake in resolving the neighboring Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The U.S. position on this issue therefore has a direct effect on Egypt’s internal security.

Jordan’s King Abdullah II allowed U.S. and British troops to operate in the eastern part of the country bordering Iraq and to station Patriot missile batteries on its soil, but did not directly extend support for the invasion. At the same time, the Jordanian regime has faced considerable domestic pressure from opposition groups regarding its ambiguous position toward the Iraq war and its relations with Washington. King Abdullah might prefer to see the rise of a reconstructed authoritarian regime in Baghdad and the continued availability of Iraqi oil shipments at discount prices. However, Abdullah also needs U.S. support against Israeli military actions that might drive large numbers of Palestinian refugees into Jordan from the West Bank. Furthermore, radical jihadist terrorists target the regime, which now requires U.S. assistance through military and security cooperation to defend against this threat.

The conservative leadership of Iran may be satisfied that the United States has deposed Saddam Hussein, but they would prefer a theocratic successor regime similar to their own. Hence, the U.S. vision of a liberal democracy and a market-based economy is not in Tehran’s interest. Although the majority of Iraqi Shiites do not seek to establish an Islamic republic, the Iranian national security leadership has covertly backed radical clerics such as Muqtada Al-Sadr in an effort to increase pressure on the United States and pull Iraq into its ideological orbit. The grand strategy of the Iranian regime has aimed at the creation of an Iraqi state dominated by sympathetic Shiites.

Saudi Arabia occupies an especially difficult position. The kingdom resisted the United States’ attempt to bring about a regime change in Iraq by force, fearing it would further destabilize the Saudi domestic political climate. Although it publicly declared its opposition to an invasion of Iraq, its historic
role as a key strategic provider of intelligence and air bases to U.S. forces has remained intact. Internally the Kingdom remains divided between conservatives who support King Abdullah, moderates who are willing to embrace gradual reforms, and radical Salafi Islamists who oppose the monarchy with the same vehement hostility that they direct toward the West and Israel. The monarchy’s failure to appease these factions ideologically, along with recent domestic terror incidents, makes continued security cooperation with the U.S. an imperative, reinforcing the monarchy’s precarious situation.

As the primary beneficiary of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, which drove the Iraqi army from Kuwaiti soil and restored the royal family to the throne, Kuwait is the only regional regime that explicitly favored the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Moreover, the royal family was undoubtedly aware that a withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region, leaving Saddam Hussein in power, would have once again exposed Kuwait to further conflict with Iraq. However, the royal family would have no reason to welcome the emergence of a democratic regime and a market-based economy in Iraq because of the contagion effect it could have on demands for political liberalization in Kuwait.

Meanwhile, Syria was implacably opposed to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the replacement of Saddam Hussein’s regime with a liberal democracy and a market-based economy. While relations between the two Ba’athist regimes in Damascus and Baghdad were historically antagonistic, the two governments had established extensive trade ties in recent years with Iraq providing oil to Syria at significantly discounted prices. The United States has also continued to identify Syria as a threat to international security because of its hostility toward Israel, its alleged efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and its support of radical Islamist and terrorist organizations. The Assad regime is therefore apprehensive that the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein dictatorship will threaten its own political well-being, that the United States will provide support to domestic opposition groups, and that conflict on the Syrian-Iraqi border will yield economic losses and general instability.

The only NATO member sharing a border with Iraq, Turkey is a major military ally of the United States and Israel. However, despite a near majority supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom in the parliament, Turkish military leaders denied the United States permission to send ground forces through

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NO REGIONAL AGGREGATION HAS EMERGED TO COUNTER THE UNITED STATES’ VISION OF A DEMOCRATIC IRAQ.
Turkey to Iraq. Ankara eventually granted over-flight rights for U.S. aircraft, but Turkish political support for U.S.-instigated regime change in Iraq has remained ambivalent. The Turks worry that a de facto declaration of independence by northern Iraqi Kurds could ignite an uprising among its own Kurdish population.

As a major regional ally of the United States, Israel supported coalition efforts to replace the Baathist regime in Baghdad with a democratic one. The removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime eliminated the threat of Iraqi missile attacks upon Israel proper, which had occurred during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. However, Israeli leaders may find that a protracted U.S. military presence in Iraq hinders its ability to pursue its own foreign policy objectives.

Israel notwithstanding, the preceding survey suggests that the impact upon domestic politics of cross-cutting regional issues largely prevents regional players from forming an anti-U.S. coalition, despite the lack of overall support for a successful U.S.-sponsored regime change in Iraq. The question remains whether the Bush administration will succeed in mobilizing its traditional “allies” in the region—Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—to help it obtain U.S. objectives.

Foreseeing the Middle Eastern Future

An analysis of the post-Iraq War Middle East relations from a “domestic sources” perspective indicates that the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its imposition of a new regime have not produced foreign policy behavior consonant with the assumptions of traditional accounts of security cooperation. As a result, the foregoing analysis has proceeded from the presumption that leaders will tend to pursue those foreign policies that are expected to preserve favorable domestic political conditions. Prevailing theories of alliances have not sufficiently addressed the overwhelming need of incumbent governments to maintain their preferred institutional arrangements. The majority of regimes in the region do not believe the intervention in Iraq has improved their security positions or strengthened their hold on political power.

In terms of the prospects for a multilateral initiative to establish a liberal government in Iraq, the United States appears to be isolated. As most of the regional powers do not prefer the current unstable status quo, Iran’s support for a clerical Shiite regime responsive to Tehran’s influence may provide the leverage to compel heretofore unlikely partners to align with its more contentious position and to avoid U.S.-friendly postures.
However, the emergence of a regional anti-U.S. coalition remains less likely than the possibility of Iran alone challenging U.S. strategic objectives in the region, particularly where Iraq’s political future is concerned. The current U.S. censure of Tehran for its pursuit of nuclear development programs reinforces this antagonistic relationship. In addition, the U.S. agenda now faces a web of opposing influences that emanate from and condition the internal conflict in Iraq. For example, a loosely organized insurgency has shifted toward civil strife with an increasingly sectarian character. Moreover, the election of new Middle Eastern governments—the Shiite administration in Iraq, Mahmoud Ahmedinjed in Iran, and Hamas in the Palestinian Authority—whose preferences are undesirable to Washington, has emerged as an unanticipated byproduct of democracy promotion. The absence of either support for or opposition to the U.S. position indicates how these conditions are expected to impact the domestic politics in their own countries. In the meantime, the regional players appear neither prepared to collectively oppose Iran’s attempt to impose its preferences on Iraq, nor geared to actively support U.S. political objectives for Iraq and the broader region. This condition calls into question the applicability of the balancing or bandwagoning models in interpreting interstate relations in the post-Iraq war Middle East. The significant U.S. military presence remaining in Iraq will produce an “overlay” effect, in which an external power attempts to exert its dominance over the local pattern of security relations. Such a hegemonic arrangement necessitates acceptance by the weaker state, which ostensibly benefits from the military capabilities and economic resources of the preponderant power. As a result, the conditions favoring such a trade-off between security and autonomy range from dormant to nonexistent.

If they perceive this particular U.S. policy as a net disadvantage for their vital interests, some long-established U.S. allies such as Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia could abstain from any regional coalition the United States attempts to build in support of its strategic objectives in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East as a whole. In that event, American policymakers may be forced to abandon the goal of relying upon unilateral U.S. influence as a means to transform the politics of the region, and instead return to the traditional approach of “constructive engagement” with regimes that may share our interests, but do not necessarily reflect our values.

NOTES

36

JASON E. STRAKES


13 Baizhu Chen, Yi Feng, and Cyrus Masroori, “Collective Action in the Middle East? A Study of Free Ride in Defense Spending,” *Journal of Peace Research* 33:3 (1996): 325. For analytical purposes, distinguishing different forms of interstate collaboration is helpful. While an *alliance* is traditionally defined as a voluntary formal agreement between two or more states that codifies mutual military support in the event of an international conflict, a *coalition* is a commitment by two or more states to coordinate their policies in order to accomplish a shared objective. See Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, 1-5; and Volker Krause and J. David Singer, “Minor Powers, Alliances, and Armed Conflict: Some Preliminary Patterns,” *Small States and Alliances*, eds. Erich Reiter and Heinz Gartner (New York: Physica-Verlag, 2000), 16.


15 Contrary to the designs of some U.S. policymakers, there is little evidence that the states surrounding Iraq have initiated significant political and economic reforms in the wake of regime change in Iraq.

16 In contrast to structural realism, the theory of power preponderance posits that while states which dominate the global power hierarchy are constrained from initiating war against the international status quo which they established, it is smaller and dissatisfied states that are concerned with relative gains and therefore behave as if the international system is anarchic. See Ronald Tammen, et al., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century*, (Chatham House: Seven Bridges Press, 2000).


18 Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace*, 90-91. Lemke indicates that dominance of the Arab-Israeli regional hierarchy shifted between Egypt and Israel over a forty-year period; thus, Israel’s current economic vitality would presumably grant it a predominant position in the present, 110.


21 On March 26, 2003 the Saudi foreign minister signaled his government’s resistance to the prosecution of the war by extending a proposal for the immediate withdrawal of Allied forces and a diplomatic resolution of the conflict.